

Mary, Did You Know?

12-11-2011

This morning we will be celebrating the birth of the Son of God; we are going to depart from our study of First Timothy and review many of the events surrounding the birth of the Savior.

Before we do, however, let's remember the application of 1Jo 1:9 as may or may not be necessary.

To say that we know little of Mary, her birth, her upbringing or her trials in being selected as the mother of the humanity of Christ is an understatement. Our brief study this morning will underscore what might have been, given both Scripture and tradition. The title of our message is "Mary, Did You Know?" It is the title of a delightful Negro spiritual in which Mary is asked, "Mary, did you know the child you will deliver will one day deliver you. So let's summarize what Mary might have known and look at a few of the difficulties she and Joseph would have experienced.

The lineage of Mary can be found in Luke, chapter 3, where in verse 31 we learn she was a descendent of King David. Nathan was the third child born to David and Bathsheba. The birth of Nathan took place after David began his reign in Jerusalem. (2Sa 5:14; 1Ch 3:5).

2Sa 5:14 And these be the names of those that were born unto him in Jerusalem; Shammuah, and Shobab, and Nathan, and Solomon,

1Ch 3:5 And these were born unto him in Jerusalem; Shimea, and Shobab, and Nathan, and Solomon, four, of Bathshua the daughter of Ammiel:

Nathan is one of the forefathers of Christ (Luk 3:31). In fact Nathan's branch of the Davidic family seems to have been recognized as important by the time of the prophet Zechariah's writing, c. 520 B.C. (Zec 12:12).

Luk 3:31 the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David...

Zec 12:10 And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.

Zec 12:11 In that day shall there be a great mourning in Jerusalem, as the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon.

Zec 12:12 And the land shall mourn, every family apart; the family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart; the family of the house of Nathan apart, and their wives apart;

The mourning of Hadadrimmon is an historical reference to the slaying of the godly King Josiah by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt. The death of Josiah was a calamity of great public significance. Just as in Hadadrimmon, one day every strata of society will bow down in universal grief over the death of Christ, whether king, prophet, priest or laity. So great will be the sorrow that even wives will not join their husbands in the lamentation, each will face his sorrow alone. The sorrow will transcend the closest earthly ties. Zechariah is describing Israel's distress when, at His Second Advent, they realize Jesus was their Messiah and they put Him on the cross.

Now let's talk a little bit about Mary. It would certainly seem she was a devout Jewish believer; as such she would have been familiar with the many predictions found in the Torah concerning the future coming of the Messiah. Like many young Jewish maidens, Mary may have held out hope of being the future mother of the Christ. This is supposition, of course, but given what we know of human nature, such hope is quite probable.

With this brief introduction, let's see what we can discern both from Scripture as well as tradition about the nativity. It is the purpose of this message for you to come away with a better appreciation of what Mary and Joseph experienced during that first Christmas season. During the 40th year of Herod the Great, in c. 4 B.C. when Abijah was high priest, the time had come for Zacharias to serve in the Temple at Jerusalem. Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth were descendants of Aaron, the first high priest who served with Moses during and immediately after Israel's sojourn in Egypt. This was a special time of service for the aging Zacharias. Both he and his wife were servants of the Lord who did their best to keep God's laws. The two were considered good people, but for some reason, though they desired children, Elizabeth had never become pregnant. Since the two of them were past normal childbearing age, they had all but given up hope.

Zacharias arrived early at the Temple for his special day of service. The old priest was excited about getting to enter the holy place to approach the altar of incense, light the incense and take the sweet-smelling mixture into the holy of holies. Only a few people followed the custom of praying outside the Temple. There they prayed the venerable Zacharias would do his job correctly, thus pleasing God. As Zacharias entered the holy place and approached the altar of incense, the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared just to the right of the altar. Zacharias's excitement now turned into abject fear.

The angel reassured him, saying, "Do not be afraid, your prayers concerning your barren wife's condition have been heard; she will bear a son and you will name him John. The boy will make you and Elizabeth very proud, and in fact John will become quite famous, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. One other thing about the boy, he must not drink either wine, beer or any other fermented beverage. The boy will also be uniquely filled with the Holy Spirit, and because of his ministry many in Israel will return to the worship of Jehovah God.

“When the boy grows up he will minister in the power and spirit of Elijah, just as Malachi exhorted. He will attempt to turn the hearts of all of Israel to God in anticipation of the coming of the Christ.”

Mal 4:5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

Mal 4:6 And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Zacharias answered, “How can I be sure what you say will happen?” Gabriel responded rather indignantly, “I am Gabriel! I am positioned in the third heaven in the throne room of Jehovah Himself. Jehovah sent me with this good news! As for your sign that these things will occur, you will not be able to speak until the day of the boy’s birth. Oh ye of little faith, this ought to take care of your need for a sign.”

The people outside the Temple were getting a little nervous due to the delay; many thought perhaps Zacharias had made some fatal error in the presence of the Lord. The faithful few remembered the Torah’s description of the death of two of Aaron’s sons.

Lev 10:1 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command.

Lev 10:2 So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Accordingly everyone was relieved when a muted but smiling Zacharias walked out the Temple door. They knew something unusual had happened because their priest of the day clearly could not speak. He communicated by writing on a parchment what Gabriel had said. Zacharias, being a dedicated priest, did not let the vision interfere with his finishing his time of service. After completing his duties he went home to Elizabeth where he shared the news. Elizabeth was more than surprised. She exclaimed, “How can this be?”

It wasn’t long before Elizabeth became pregnant; for five months she said nothing about her condition. She was happy as a lark and full of gratitude to God. “I am so glad Jehovah has heard my prayer and remembered my unfortunate condition. I am no longer barren!”

Now Elizabeth had a cousin named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Both Mary and Joseph were from the tribe of Judah and thus descended from David, Joseph by way of Solomon and Mary by way of Nathan. Mary was a virgin living with her parents in a little village called Nazareth. In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy God sent Gabriel on another assignment. He was dispatched to Nazareth, where he spoke directly to Mary, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what had all this meant? As you might imagine, she was terrified. The angel comforted her. “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be famous, even called the Son of the Highest. The Father is going to give Him the throne of David and He will rule Jacob’s house forever!”

Mary was startled. She exclaimed, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. As a result of your immaculate conception, your Son Jesus will be called the Son of God. I know this is hard for you to understand. To help you through this most unusual situation, your cousin Elizabeth is going to have a child in her old age; in fact this relative of yours is now in her sixth month.”

Mary responded, “But Elizabeth is past childbearing, and everyone knows how dearly both she and Zacharias have desired a child and...” The angel interrupted, “Mary, nothing is impossible with God.” Mary answered, “I am the Lord’s, and am ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.” As quickly as Gabriel had appeared, he disappeared, leaving Mary all alone and wondering how she would tell her parents and Joseph. She knew the law and its draconian punishments; would she be stoned to death and what would poor Joseph think? Needless to say, she had many terrible nightmares as she dreaded the day when she would have to make known her condition to family, friends and her beloved Joseph. Mary finally got up the nerve to tell her family of her pregnant condition and the visit of Gabriel. As you might imagine, neither her mother nor her dad was understanding of her condition. They wondered, “Could Mary be lying about the visit of Gabriel?”

Particularly disturbed was her dad. As was the custom of the day, he had negotiated the dowry with Joseph and his family. Joseph was piqued and disgraced. Mary was sorrowed, but she certainly understood why there were those who doubted her account. As her condition progressed even Joseph found living in Nazareth especially difficult; most of those living in the little village looked angrily at him as though he might be complicit in the pregnancy. Mary continued to help her mother with the chores around the house. She found avoiding others in the village her best course of action. There was little discussion of her situation; it was as though all contact with family and friends ceased. Only cold stares and silence were hers.

Mary was so relieved and ecstatic when word reached Nazareth concerning Elizabeth's pregnancy. She was glad she had told her family of Gabriel's prophecy concerning Elizabeth. Mary wanted to leave immediately for the hill country of Judah, where Elizabeth and Zacharias now lived. Mary asked her dad if she could visit Elizabeth to discuss their new-found conditions.

Mary's father began to look for anyone traveling in that direction. Soon a reputable family agreed to accept Mary's company. Upon arriving at Zacharias's home Elizabeth and Mary made their way into the kitchen where they embraced and excitedly set about sharing their stories of angelic visitation. Elizabeth told Mary how John had jumped in her womb at the sound of Mary's voice. "It was as though John could not wait to announce the Messiah's arrival on earth," declared Elizabeth. Both women were so moved they began to praise God for their selection as God's servants: John to announce the birth of the Christ and Jesus who would be crowned the King of kings and Lord of lords. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to Nazareth, where she told many stories concerning Zacharias and Elizabeth and their plans for their baby.

There were many in Nazareth, however, who were still skeptical of the facts surrounding Mary's conception. Joseph, in the meantime, was working on a home for him and his pregnant bride. He could not wait to tell Mary of his special dream. He took Mary by the hand and led her to the idyllic setting where Joseph was building their future home. They sat together in the shade of a large sycamore tree.

"Mary, while you were gone I thought a lot about us--I decided not to expose you to public disgrace, and then that same night after I had made this decision an angel of the Lord appeared to me in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'" The two of them tearfully embraced, vowing to avoid sexual union until their son Jesus was born. For the first time since her dad's announcement of her engagement, Mary knew Joseph was her right man and that God's hand had provided her with a wonderful husband and father for their son. Joseph from that day forward became very protective of Mary and their first-born.

Herod had a real thing about the Jews. Though an Edomite, he learned as much as he could from his advisors about the Jews and their claim of a Messiah king who would come and replace Roman rule. Herod in his paranoia required his Sanhedrin guards and Roman legions to watch the Jews carefully; even the accouterments of the Temple were kept at a fortress across from the Temple. The accouterments were only issued to the high priest for special festivals. Worse, however, were the raids of the villages located in Galilee and Judah. These raids were designed to terrorize the Jewish citizenry and therefore "keep them in line." Nazareth in the hill country was not excluded from these barbaric intrusions in which many young girls were abused and kidnapped by their foreign rulers.

People in the villages often spoke longingly of the day when a Messiah king would come and rid the land of Roman rule. Herod was simply thought of as a lap dog of Augustus, not a real Jewish ruler.

Shepherds in the hills around Nazareth were not only there to care for their sheep but also to alert the locals of approaching Roman cavalry.

During the raids of the Romans, men like Joseph would hide their wives and daughters in hopes of avoiding the wayward hands of "Herod's finest."

One morning a messenger came to the home of Mary's father announcing the birth of Elizabeth's son. They had named the baby John. The family was surprised at the name since no one in Zacharias's lineage was named John. They were also amazed at the story of Zacharias's speech returning at the very moment of John's birth. A deep, reverential fear settled over the neighborhood, and in all the Judean hills people could talk of nothing else except Zacharias praising God with his first words. Then with that same formerly silent tongue, the old priest began to prophesy that John would go ahead of the Messiah king to prepare His way. Clearly, declared the people, "God Himself must be in this!"

About the same time as the birth of John, Caesar Augustus needed extra revenue so he ordered a census. By order of Caesar everyone was ordered to travel to his ancestral hometown where he would be counted and taxed.

Luk 2:1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

So Joseph and Mary left Nazareth and traveled to the city of Bethlehem in the province of Judah. While there, the time came for her to give birth to King Jesus. Unfortunately for Joseph and Mary, the census had caused significant crowding. There were no rooms available in any of the inns, so Joseph scurried about the city until he finally found accommodations in a stable. Thus the King of the Jews was born not in a palace but in a barn full of assorted farm animals. The talented and innovative Joseph made provision in the barn as best he could. After the painful trauma of Mary giving birth, Joseph cut the umbilical cord, made sure the baby was alive and normal and then handed the Christ child to Mary. She wrapped the baby in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a feed trough.

At about the time of Jesus' birth, near the city of Bethlehem, there were shepherds watching over their sheep; many of that flock would be used as paschal lambs. Suddenly, an angel of God appeared above them and God's glory blazed around and about them. The shepherds were terrified; to comfort them, one of the angels said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event. A Savior has just been born in the city of Bethlehem. He is Christ the Lord. He will be a Savior for all people everywhere! This is what you're to look for, a baby carefully wrapped and lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." After the angelic choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over and decided, "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has done."

They left tending their sheep and made their way hurriedly to Bethlehem, where they found Mary and Joseph and the Christ child lying in a manger. After seeing and worshipping the Christ, they left the tiny village and spread the word concerning the appearance of the angels and all they had been told about this child. All who heard their messages were amazed. The shepherds then returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them within her heart. She often recalled these events, pondering their full meaning. Not only had her little family been visited by a band of shepherds from the Judean hills, but even stranger was the visit by a band of scholars from the land of Persia. The story of these men was far more complicated than Mary knew. For you see, the wise men had first arrived in Jerusalem in search of a new Jewish king. They knew from their study of several ancient scrolls left originally by Daniel in 606 B.C. that a Messiah king would be born in Judah. Their journey had been further facilitated by a study of the stars. They in fact had been led by a great star in the western sky. For years they had been observing and charting the western skies, but never before had they seen such a star. It had at first appeared as three stars, but soon the three became one giant and very bright light. Using the ancient Scriptures and their new found star, they had made the long trip. The scholars entered Jerusalem and inquired of the new king's birth.

The Persians made clear they were on a pilgrimage to worship him. When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was disturbed--most of Jerusalem was all abuzz concerning the purpose of their visit. Herod lost no time. He gathered all his Jewish scribes and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" They told him, "Bethlehem in the province of Judah." The scribes further informed Herod, "The prophet Micah has written „You, Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come one who will be ruler over Israel."

Herod the Great then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be a devout Jew, he got them to divulge exactly when the star first appeared. Then Herod told the visitors that his scribes were certain the child would be born in the city of Bethlehem and that they should go immediately and find this new Christ child. The nefarious Herod then piously proclaimed, "Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you, for I too want to worship him."

The Persians set off on their journey. The star they had earlier followed grew brighter and brighter with each mile covered. It led them until it hovered over the new home of the Christ child. They could hardly contain themselves. They were in the right place. The entire house was bathed in the effulgence of the Shekinah glory. The men entered the house and saw baby Jesus in the arms of Mary. Overcome, they knelt and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Later in a dream the wise men were warned not to report back to Herod, so they worked out another route home. They left Judah and returned to their own country. It was then an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you it is safe to return. Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So Joseph made immediate preparations to move his family. He took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt; it was there he stayed until the death of Herod the Great. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet Hosea: "Out of Egypt I called my Son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Persians, he was furious and gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Clearly Herod was not successful: Jesus survived to live a perfect life. He became as John the Baptist had declared, "The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

Joh 1:29 The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

Joh 1:30 This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.

Joh 1:31 And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.

Joh 1:32 And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.

Joh 1:33 And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Spirit.

Joh 1:34 And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God

And so we ask this morning not Mary, did you know? but rather "have you met the Savior and declared Him to be the Son of God?" If not, do it right now as Ken Harrell comes and leads us in the singing of the famous hymn "Just As I Am."